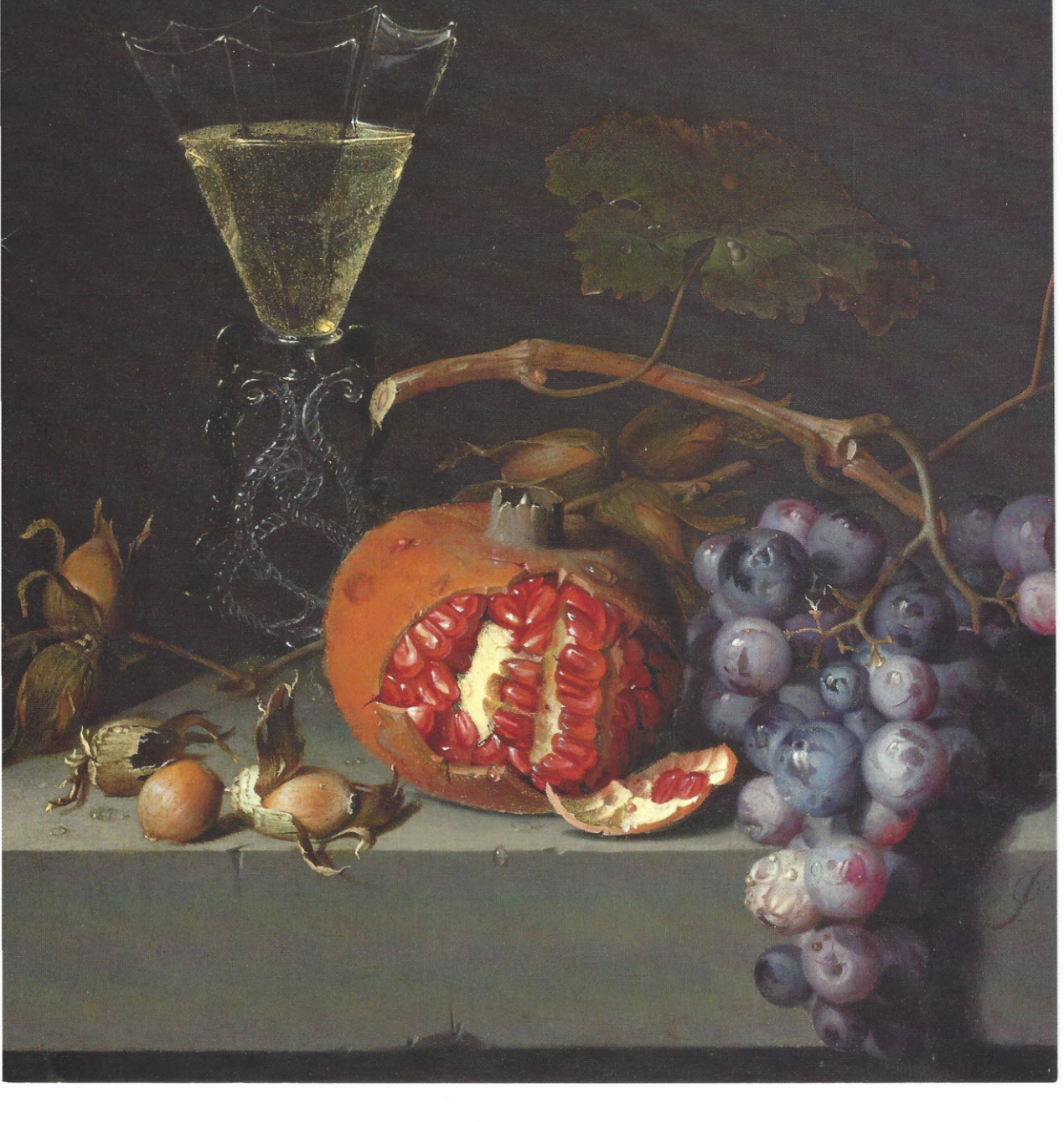
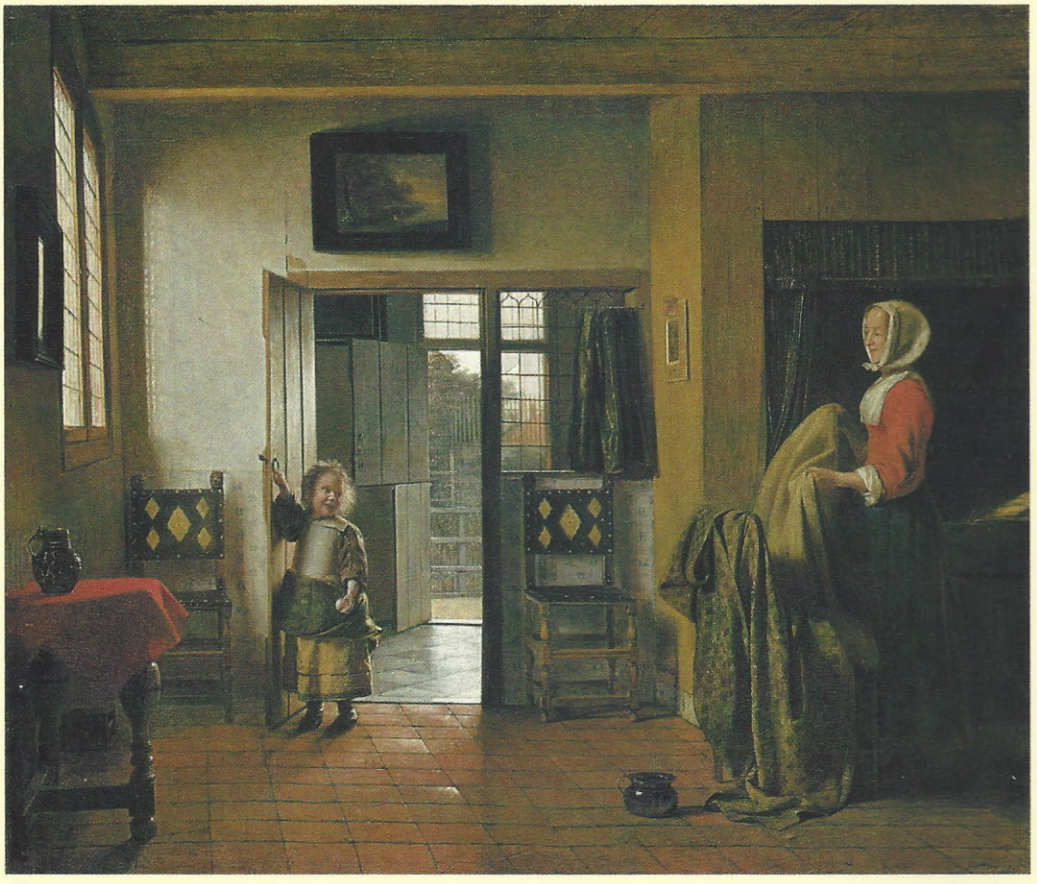
NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

The Dutch and Flemish Cabinet Galleries





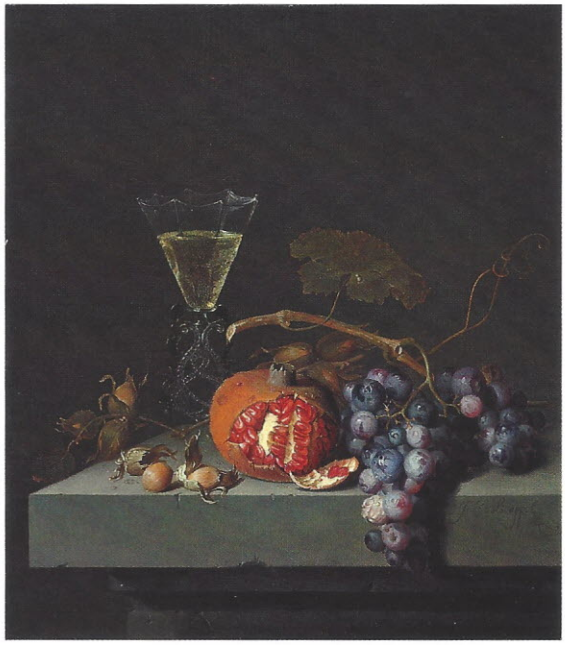
1 | Pieter de Hooch, *The Bedroom*, 1658/1660, oil on canvas, Widener Collection

The Dutch and Flemish Cabinet Galleries provide a suite of intimately scaled rooms for exhibiting modest-size paintings, known as *kabinetstukken* (cabinet pieces), in a manner that simulates the interiors of seventeenth-century homes in both the northern and southern Netherlands. Much as they would have been in seventeenth-century collectors' cabinets, Dutch and Flemish works representing a wide variety of subjects and moods are here intermingled and exhibited in close proximity to each other. The wall cases in the central cabinet gallery allow for the display of particularly small paintings, as well as other delicate objects, including works on paper, porcelain, musical instruments, exotic shells, and precious decorative arts.

Contemporary accounts, including diaries of foreign visitors and estate inventories, attest to the quantity of pictures in Dutch and Flemish residences. A majority of households, even those of modest means, owned paintings, as evident in Pieter de Hooch's *The Bedroom* (**fig. 1**). People with more limited resources would decorate their dwellings with prints and drawings, as seen in David Teniers the Younger's joyous *Tavern Scene* (**fig. 2**), where an unframed sheet depicting an owl is tacked to the wall. The well-to-do would hang paintings throughout their homes, but many also had dedicated cabinet galleries to display their collections.

Paintings were greatly valued for their beauty, particularly in the rendering of light and textures; for their engaging narratives, which often provided insights into the foibles of human behavior; and for their underlying moral and ethical messages. Artists often painted these remarkably refined images on copper or wood panel supports using

2 | David Teniers the Younger, *Tavern Scene*, 1658, oil on panel, Gift of Robert H. and Clarice Smith



3 | Ambrosius Bosschaert, *Bouquet of Flowers in a Glass Vase*, 1621, oil on copper, Patrons' Permanent Fund and New Century Fund (top left)

4 | Jacob van Walscapelle, *Still Life with Fruit*, 1675, oil on panel, Juliet and Lee Folger/The Folger Fund (top right and cover detail)

5 | Dutch or Flemish 17th Century, *Trompe l'Oeil of an Etching by Ferdinand Bol*, c. 1675, oil on panel, Fund given in honor of Derald Ruttenberg's Grandchildren (right)

very high-quality pigments. For example, Johannes Vermeer often used ultramarine, a blue pigment derived from imported lapis lazuli, a costly semiprecious stone. Collectors admired compositions created from the imagination, such as biblical and mythological scenes (known as history paintings), as well as works that depicted the visual world, including still lifes, genre paintings (scenes of daily life), portraits, and landscapes.

Still-life paintings depicting strikingly beautiful flora and fauna, as well as precious objects imported on Dutch merchant ships, were highly prized. Ambrosius Bosschaert's stunning floral still life *Bouquet of Flowers in a Glass Vase* (**fig. 3**) was commissioned by a patron at the court of the Prince of Orange in The Hague for the extraordinary sum of 1,000 guilders (almost three and a half times the annual income of a day laborer). As in this work, many Dutch and Flemish still lifes depict arrangements of a wide variety of flowers that actually bloom at different seasons of the year, as though in celebration of the diversity and glory of God's creations. Artists composed these imaginary bouquets on the basis of studies they had drawn or painted of individual plants. Much like Bosschaert, Jacob van Walscapelle also imbued his beautiful *Still Life with Fruit* (**fig. 4**) with Christian ideas. The ripe pomegranate with its red seeds and the purple grapes that spill over the edge of the stone table into the viewer's space symbolize Christ's death and resurrection.

Some still lifes, such as *Trompe l'Oeil of an Etching by Ferdinand Bol* (**fig. 5**), seem so real that they deceive the viewer's eyes. Here it appears that an etching by Bol has been affixed to a pine board with a red wax seal. This convincing deception would have delighted the viewer who had been fooled into thinking that the print, seal, and pine board were real.

In an era when Dutch merchant ships traveled the globe and commerce brought unprecedented prosperity to the country, paintings depicting cargo vessels in port or on stormy seas, naval ships in battle, bustling harbors, or sandy coasts were given pride of place in many homes. With the sun's rays piercing through the evening clouds, Simon de Vlieger's luminous *Estuary at Day's End* (**fig. 6**) celebrates the majesty of the natural world and the diligence of the Dutch people who worked in concert with nature. Men apply heated tar to the bottom of a cargo vessel during low tide, while the warship in the background reassures the viewer that Dutch commerce is safe because of the country's powerful navy.

Despite their true-to-life appearances, the marine paintings, landscapes, and cityscapes so popular with Golden Age collectors are carefully composed studio creations and do not necessarily reflect specific realities. Jan Brueghel the Elder was renowned for his highly detailed and jewellike landscapes that bustle with activity, such as the exquisite *River Landscape* (**fig. 7**). The smooth surface of the painting's copper support allowed Brueghel to optimize his delicate brushwork and show off the mastery of color and light with which he created his subtle atmospheric effects. With its bright sky, shimmering reflections, and lush foliage, Jan van der Heyden's *View down a Dutch Canal* (**fig. 8**) is a superb example of a cityscape. In this virtuoso image, the architectural elements, including minutely rendered brick facades of churches and other buildings lining the canal, become three-dimensional realities. This seemingly idyllic view of Amsterdam, Holland's largest city and the country's economic motor, is actually a subtle reminder of the imaginative underpinnings of Dutch realism: Van der Heyden incorporated the compact church tower of Veere (a town in the province Zeeland) in the center of his composition.

6 | Simon de Vlieger, *Estuary at Day's End*, c. 1640/1645, oil on panel, Patrons' Permanent Fund and The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund in memory of Kathrine Dulin Folger (above)

7 | Jan Brueghel the Elder, *River Landscape*, 1607, oil on copper, Patrons' Permanent Fund and Nell and Robert Weidenhammer Fund (top right)

8 | Jan van der Heyden, *View down a Dutch Canal*, c. 1670, oil on panel, Gift of George M. and Linda H. Kaufman (bottom right)

9 | Hendrick Avercamp, *A Scene on the Ice*, c. 1625, oil on panel, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund (above)

10 | Jan van Goyen, *Ice Scene near a Wooden Observation Tower*, 1646, oil on panel, The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund (right)

11 | Balthasar van der Ast, *Basket of Fruits*, c. 1622, oil on panel, Collection of Mrs. Paul Mellon

The era of harsh, cold weather across western Europe that became known as the Little Ice Age inspired artists to depict the flat Dutch landscape in the depths of winter. In Hendrick Avercamp's delightful *Scene on the Ice* (**fig. 9**), young and old, rich and poor — a true cross section of society — use this frozen body of water for skating parties with friends, playing *kolf* (an early form of golf), and transporting commodities on sleds. One generation later, Jan van Goyen painted his *Ice Scene near a Wooden Observation Tower* (**fig. 10**) using a tonal palette of muted browns and grays to evoke the piercing cold of a Dutch winter, albeit on a beautiful calm day that similarly enticed the people to go skating or take a ride in a horse-drawn sleigh.

The surge in collecting in the Netherlands was closely intertwined with the transformative political and religious events that shook the very character of society in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The Dutch Revolt against Spanish political control, which began in 1568 and lasted intermittently until the signing of the Treaty of Münster in 1648, reshaped the region's political and cultural boundaries. The successful revolt split the seventeen provinces collectively known as the Netherlands into the predominantly Protestant northern Dutch Republic and the Southern Netherlands, which remained under the Spanish Habsburg crown and stayed firmly Catholic. In the Dutch Republic, the increasingly prosperous merchant elite dominated government and civic institutions and used their new wealth to build stately new city homes that were decorated with paintings.

12 | Cornelis van Poelenburch, *The Prophet Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath*, c. 1630, oil on panel, Gift of Joseph F. McCrindle in honor of John Thomas Rowe, Jr.

In the Dutch Republic, Prince Frederik Hendrik of Orange used art patronage to enhance his court's international stature in the 1630s. He commissioned large-scale history paintings by, among others, Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck to decorate his residences in and around The Hague, as these Flemish masters were familiar with Italian traditions and excelled in the depiction of grand historical and mythological subjects. For their cabinet paintings, the prince and his wife, Amalia von Solms, favored works by Dutch artists. The 1632 inventory of their collection indicates, for example, that a pair of still lifes by Balthasar van der Ast — *Basket of Flowers* and *Basket of Fruits* (**fig. 11**) — hung in Amalia's private chamber. In these delightful pendant paintings, Van der Ast portrayed nature's bounty by carefully arranging flowers, fruits, shells, and insects, capturing the inherent qualities of each object.

Courtiers, government officials, and other members of the Dutch elite eagerly emulated the princely collectors, and the upper-middle class soon followed suit, resulting in a booming art market. The most passionate and knowledgeable aficionados were identified as *liefhebbers* (art lovers), many of whom turned their art holdings into *kunstkamers* (cabinets of curiosities) by also acquiring antiquities and rare specimens from around the world. Significant collections conferred enormous social prestige on their owners. Many important artists and collectors lived in Amsterdam, the country's largest and richest city, but Haarlem, Leiden, and Delft were also thriving centers of artistic production.

Views of Italy were extremely popular among the Dutch elite, many of whom had traveled there as young men to witness the country's ancient and natural wonders. Cornelis van Poelenburch, a highly respected landscapist from Utrecht, went to Rome in the 1620s to study ancient ruins, the Italian Campagna, and the work of Italy's Renaissance masters. After his return to the Netherlands, Poelenburch continued to paint mythological and biblical scenes situated in Italianate landscapes, such as *The Prophet Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath* (**fig. 12**), which illustrates an Old Testament story exemplifying the power of faith.

Virtually every collector's cabinet included small-scale portraits of family members and well-known citizens. Given that portraiture aims to immortalize its sitters, it is ironic that relatively few of the individuals depicted in Dutch seventeenth-century portraits can be named with certainty. For example, the meticulously rendered *Portrait of a Gentleman Wearing a Fancy Ruff* (**fig. 13**) by the esteemed Amsterdam portraitist

13 | Thomas de Keyser, *Portrait of a Gentleman Wearing a Fancy Ruff*, 1627, oil on copper, The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund

14 | Michael Sweerts, *Anthonij de Bordes and His Valet*, c. 1648, oil on canvas, Gift from the Collection of Dr. Arthur and Mrs. Arlene Elkind, Fund given in honor of Derald Ruttenberg's Grandchildren, and New Century Fund

Thomas de Keyser may portray Pieter Lastman, a fellow artist who taught both Rembrandt van Rijn and Jan Lievens, but a 1926 sales receipt lists the painting as De Keyser's self-portrait. Despite its modest size, the pictorial effects of the stunning lace collar enhance this engaging portrait's great visual power.

Some works, like Michael Sweerts's intriguing image of *Anthonij de Bordes and His Valet* (**fig. 14**), straddle the fields of portraiture and genre painting. Sweerts portrayed De Bordes, a cloth merchant from Amsterdam who worked in Italy in the late 1640s, holding on to his riding boot's bright-red felt liner while a manservant pulls off the dust-covered footwear. This unusual pictorial motif subtly points to the sitter's social status. Jan Miense Molenaer's *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player* (**fig. 15**) is similarly narrative in its conceit. Next to a table covered with an array of objects that signify the appeal of sensual pleasures, including wine, food, tobacco, and another stringed instrument, Molenaer depicts himself tuning his lute, symbolically indicating that he conducts his life in a balanced and harmonious manner.

Buyers avidly collected genre paintings, or pictures of people engaged in a vast array of indoor and outdoor activities. Informal — sometimes even caricaturist — paintings of peasants or laborers drinking and carousing, such as Adriaen Brouwer's broadly painted visual jest *Youth Making a Face* (**fig. 16**), appealed to the urban elite, who probably used these scenes as catalysts for lively discussions about social behavior and decorum.

15 | Jan Miense Molenaer, *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player*, c. 1635, oil on panel, The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund (top left)

16 | Adriaen Brouwer, *Youth Making a Face*, c. 1632/1635, oil on panel, New Century Fund (top right)

17 | Frans van Mieris, *A Soldier Smoking a Pipe*, c. 1657/1658, oil on panel, The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund (bottom)

18 | Caspar Netscher, *A Woman Feeding a Parrot, with a Page*, 1666, oil on panel, The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund

19 | Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, c. 1664, oil on canvas, Widener Collection

The exquisitely rendered *Soldier Smoking a Pipe* (**fig. 17**) by Frans van Mieris, one of Leiden's foremost *fijnschilders* (fine-painters), is likely a portrait in a genre setting. The discarded armor and the banner attached to the horn lying on the floor next to the man suggest that he is a militia company's standard-bearer, smoking a pipe while seated at a table strewn with objects. An elegant baton and cloak left resting on the empty chair next to the soldier might be the spoils of a card game he has just finished with another officer.

Over the course of the century, the subjects of genre scenes became increasingly refined, as in Caspar Netscher's captivating *Woman Feeding a Parrot, with a Page* (**fig. 18**). Wearing a sumptuous dress with slashed sleeves, the young woman looks up coquettishly as she feeds her African gray parrot. Released from its cage, the bird, whose intelligence made it a treasured companion, symbolizes the woman's independent spirit. Many genre paintings focus on the roles of women in society, especially in the domestic sphere. The elegant ladies seen in the works by Vermeer and his contemporaries represent the highly educated women of the elite who were in charge of upholding their families' moral rectitude. Vermeer's paintings were especially prized in collectors' cabinets. His *Woman Holding a Balance* (**fig. 19**) focuses on a woman whose delicate features have a timelessness that transcends categorization. Concentrating on the balance in her hand, the woman's attitude reflects her inner peace and serenity, echoing the subtle warning — implied by the painting of the Last Judgment on the wall behind her — that one should lead a life of temperance and balanced judgment. Genre scenes frequently contain moralistic or religious messages — be they implicit or explicit — about the emotional character and complexity of human life.

The Cabinet Galleries provide an appropriate home for some of the Gallery's greatest treasures. Vermeer's quiet scenes and other modestly sized paintings can thus be enjoyed with a sense of privacy one might experience in a domestic setting. In his *A Lady Writing* (**fig. 20**), a young woman in a sumptuous ermine-lined yellow jacket looks up quizzically as we interrupt her letter writing. Engaging our view directly, she gently allows us into her private space. Such small-scale paintings meant for close viewing appealed to seventeenth-century collectors as the perfect objects to invite detailed scrutiny and stimulate intellectual discussions. We hope that your visit to the Dutch and Flemish Cabinet Galleries will provide both quiet moments of contemplation as well as active debates as you cast yourself in the role of *liefhebber*.

20 | Johannes Vermeer, *A Lady Writing*, c. 1665, oil on canvas, Gift of Harry Waldron Havemeyer and Horace Havemeyer, Jr., in memory of their father, Horace Havemeyer

What is a cabinet gallery?

Cabinet galleries were intimate spaces in which seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish art collectors would display small paintings and other delicate objects. The Cabinet Galleries at the National Gallery of Art provide a similar setting for close viewing of some of the Gallery's greatest treasures.

The brochure was made possible by The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund.

The brochure was written by Henriette Rahusen, department of northern baroque painting. It was produced by the publishing office, National Gallery of Art. © 2018 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art.

Please note: The exhibition of works in the Cabinet Galleries is subject to change.

www.nga.gov